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ABSTRACT

Making sense of developmental education in the two-year college is difficult, particularly in the shadow of the fear that it is not working very well. There is no choice, however, but to examine openly a serious problem. The "story" about developmental education in the two-year college that most educators would like to believe is that of "struggle, followed by struggle, followed by success." Students placed in developmental courses are told that they are in class to develop the skills they will need to succeed in college-level courses. Most instructors are aware that this "story" is not true. Their own justifications for remedial education focus instead on the good experiences that developmental courses do provide; the positive effects of improved reading and writing skills on students' employment expectations; and the effects of developmental courses on cultural awareness, educational attitudes, or citizenship. Some of these substitute stories may be true, some false, some difficult to verify. Before a new story can be told a sharp eye must be cast at the social context in which the story telling occurs. The protagonist of the new story about developmental education would not be the individual student or the instructor, but rather the entire social class from which the remedial student emerges. With the "urban underclass" as the protagonist, a new set of questions arises. What damaging beliefs about itself has this class accepted from above? What beliefs about success in school does it hold? How should the clash between student and teacher be interpreted and be transformed? Can the urban underclass adopt some version of middle-class academic culture without betraying itself? To what extent do developmental programs reproduce in college the ghettoization of the urban underclass in the city? The plot structure for the new story would be "struggle, followed by struggle, followed by questions." (EJV)

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DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION:

STORIES WE TELL OUR STUDENTS

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National Conference of the
Community College Humanities Association
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Developmental Education: Stories We Tell Our Students

National Conference, Community College Humanities Association
San Francisco, California
November 21, 1986

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Trying to make sense of developmental education in the two-year college is a difficult task. A particularly formidable block to understanding issues in this area is, I am convinced, an underlying fear that developmental education is not working very well, a fear made all the more intense and more deeply hidden by an accompanying strong belief that if we were to abandon developmental education--or even change it significantly--we would be abandoning the very students community colleges were created to serve.

As members of an intellectual community, however, we really have no choice but to examine openly a serious problem where we see it, whatever the political dangers of doing so in a national, state, and local environment hostile to the students served by developmental programs. For if we can figure it out, if we can make sense of what developmental education is doing now, there is some reason to hope that we can build something better for the future, something with enough internal strength and coherence to withstand political attacks from the outside.

One way to begin the task of understanding developmental education is to examine the way we talk to students in developmental programs about the nature of their education, particularly the way we tell the story of their education, the narrative path we say or imply they are following. To examine the story is no light matter, for it may well be that our lives--our own lives, our students' lives, the lives of our schools--have meaning only when they have a conscious, coherent narrative pattern, only when they have a story. The story we tell can be examined from a number of angles, including these: first, how coherent is the story? Second, to the extent that the story is coherent, what principle of plot construction provides the coherence? Third, what is the relation between the story we

tell students and the story students tell? And fourth, is the story true; does it bear a reasonable resemblance to what occurs in the world outside the story?

My source for faculty stories about students in developmental programs is largely my own teaching, what I have told students in the dozen years I have taught developmental courses at Community College of Philadelphia. And since most of my teaching of developmental courses has been done in cooperation with other teachers, I draw also on thier stories, as well as on the stories textbook writers and other educators tell when, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, they describe outright or merely hint at particular narrative patterns in our students' lives.

Here then is the story I and others have been telling our students in developmental programs, typically on the first day of class or in, say, a workbook's "Preface for Students": "As you know, you have been placed in this developmental program because the placement exam you took indicated that you would have a very difficult time in regular college courses, perhaps even flunking out before you had a chance to demonstrate your true abilities. To avoid that disaster, the school has placed you in this program so that you can develop here some skills you will need to gain success in regular college courses. Unlike the situation you would face in regular college courses, here you will be able to build your skills in a step-by-step mannner until you are truly ready to move on."

On its face, this story seems coherent. Students who test into developmental programs, it claims, generally have the inherent abilities to succeed in college but for some reason lack the skills necessary for the expression of those abilities in the forms demanded by institutions of higher learning. The principle of plot construction that gives this story its coherence is essentially a romantic one: through struggle followed by struggle, success will be achieved, a plot, as Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg put it, that moves from "desire to consummation" (**The Nature of Narrative**, Oxford, 1966, p. 212). Though most students who end up in developmental programs seem unhappy at having been placed there, this romantic plot line is one many of them see as their own. They have been working against the odds, but in spite of all, here they are in college, perhaps full of doubts and other mixed feelings, but proud to have made it this far.

The fourth question to be put to this story I and others have told our students in developmental programs has

a less happy answer. Again, the question is whether the story is true, whether it bears a reasonable resemblance to what occurs in the world outside the story. The story of moving from success in developmental programs to success in regular college programs is, unfortunately, not a true story for most students who begin their paths through college in developmental courses. As article after article in Steven Zwerling's recent anthology shows, there is something about community colleges as institutions that seriously blocks the progress of their students both toward graduation and toward successful transfer to four-year institutions (**The Community College and Its Critics**, San Francisco, 1986). This lack of success can be seen across the entire spectrum of community college students but is particularly pronounced in those groups served by developmental programs.

Having told our students and ourselves a story that is false for most of them, we fall back on other, different, stories, stories we tell ourselves, and, in special situations, a few students. Some of these substitute stories may be true, some false, some difficult to verify, but all are also rationalizations necessary when we face the falsity of the romantic tale we and our students tell each other. The substitute stories I have in mind are these: first, well, even if our students don't end up progressing very far through school, there must be some good things that their experiences in developmental education gives them. Second, they learn to read and write better, for instance, which will increase their chances of getting better jobs. Third, or even if they don't get better jobs as the result of their developmental education, they increase their citizenship skills and are now more likely to vote and to do so wisely. Fourth, also it is likely that students' cultural appetites have been increased by our programs and that therefore they will in the future be more likely to use the public library, attend plays, and go to museums. Fifth, or even if our students themselves do not end up making their way in the world very well, they are now more likely to do such things as read to their children, so there is thereby some hope for the next generation. And finally, the failure of the huge majority of our developmental students can be justified by the success of those very few who really do have both the ability and the commitment necessary to such success.

This last story, that the few really talented and committed ones go on to success, is a development of the original romantic plot line of struggle followed by struggle followed by success. It is a development of an element in that plot understandably underplayed in the original telling of the story. That underplayed element is the character of

the protagonist appropriate to the romantic plot line. That character is essentially flat and can be measured in two dimensions: talent and commitment. The dark, untold side of the romantic tale therefore is this: that the huge numbers of our students who fail do so because they lack either talent or commitment or both. And in fact we do sometimes find ourselves telling this dark side of the story, to our students in bursts of anger ("if you would only take school seriously, you could make it!"), quietly to our colleagues ("I have no hope for this class").

If this romantic tale is indeed untrue for most of the students in our developmental programs, a new story needs to be told. But what would that mean? Here are some possibilities: telling a new story could mean first, keep a developmental program as it is but tell the truth about it; perhaps, for instance, one or more of the substitute stories is true. Or second, change the program significantly and tell the truth about the new program. Or third, eliminate developmental programs and tell students and ourselves some hard truths about real college. Or fourthly, do any of the preceding but before doing so rethink the story telling altogether, with a sharp eye to the social context in which the story telling occurs.

It is to this fourth possibility I wish to speak, for determinations made in this area, the social context of the stories we tell our students, may well clarify the choices we make between describing differently, changing, or eliminating developmental programs.

If we were to consider the social contexts in which we tell and are told the story of our students' paths into, through, and out of college, we might start with the question of whether or not we have put the right person at the center of the story. As now told by student and teacher alike, the romantic tale has at its center the individual student. Upon her or his particular combination of talent and determination rests the burden of success or failure.

But if the social context of our story telling were taken more seriously, the center of the story might be quite different. If, for instance, the social class status of many of the students who are placed into developmental programs were considered, we might make a whole social class the protagonist of the story. And in order to construct a story with, for instance, an urban underclass as the protagonist, we would need to ask a new set of questions: first, what damaging beliefs about itself has this class accepted from above? Specifically, what beliefs about success in school has this class adopted? Does it believe,

for instance, that the best individuals rise to the top and that therefore community colleges receive those students who rightfully belong in the pits? And how might we respond to those who steadfastly hold to such a belief while at the same time insisting that the community college is a stepping stone? Second, how are we to interpret the clash between student and teacher cultures? How do teachers see this conflict? How do students? And is there a way to transform this conflict into one that promotes the transformation of students? Third, if it is true that in order to succeed in college, the urban underclass--or at least that portion of it drawn to community colleges--is going to have to adopt some version of a middle class academic culture, can it make those changes without betraying itself? Fourth, to what extent do developmental programs reproduce in the college the ghettoization of the urban underclass in the city? What are the college's barriers to integration? And finally, what might be the principle of plot construction for this new story with its new protagonist? What could replace the romantic plot structure that has proved so deceiving? I am sure I do not know, but I am tempted to suggest a Brechtian plot structure, one that my presentation this morning might be said to have adopted: struggle followed by struggle followed by questions.

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